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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KHARTOUM 000782

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/SPG, S/CRS, SE WILLIAMSON
DEPT PLS PASS USAID FOR AFR/SUDAN
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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [MOPS](#) [KPKO](#) [SU](#)
SUBJECT: HEAVY FIGHTING IN ABYEI MAY 20 EVENTUALLY DIES DOWN, CALLS
FOR INTERNATIONAL ACTION

REF: A. KHARTOUM 775 B. KHARTOUM 774 C. KHARTOUM 772 D. KHARTOUM 762
[E](#). KHARTOUM 745 F. KHARTOUM 737

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Heavy fighting took place in Abyei May 20 between SAF and SPLM forces. Each side accuses the other of an unprovoked attack. A tense calm returned later in the day, with both sides back in their original positions. SPLM officials complained that President Kiir is under intense pressure to reverse his public May 15 order for SPLA restraint and that they are frustrated by the failure of international partners to act. A UN official told CG Juba that the international community must take a strong stand immediately to finally end the Abyei or the situation will spin entirely out of control. END SUMMARY.

Battle in Abyei

[1](#)2. (SBU) According to UNMIS, early on May 20 SPLA forces entered Abyei town and by 0830 had occupied what remained of the town after previous fighting. SAF responded by attacking and driving the SPLA out, but in turn were themselves ejected by the SPLA, including tanks. Following their defeat of the SAF, the SPLA evacuated the town and returned to positions on the Kiir river (this roughly confirms what MFA U/S told CDA Fernandez early on May 20). At some point in the afternoon, SAF aircraft, including Antonov "bombers" appeared, circling the town but did not actually bomb, despite rumors to the contrary.

SAF "Livid"

[1](#)3. (SBU) MFA U/S Mutriff Siddiq called CDA Fernandez May 20 to inform him of renewed fighting in Abyei (which was widely reported an Al-Jazeera) which Mutriff said was instigated by an SPLA surprise attack on the SAF's 31st brigade at 5:00 a.m. the morning of May 20 (Ref A). The SPLA reportedly took control of the SAF base and killed six SAF soldiers - two officers including a colonel and four enlisted. Siddiq said the SAF and the NCP are livid and have attempted to call the SPLM/A, "but of course all their phones are off."

GoSS: We Only Acted Defensively

[1](#)4. (SBU) SPLM/SPLA sources in Juba told ConGen staff a somewhat different story than the NCP and UNMIS on the same day. According to both GNU Foreign Minister Deng Alor and SPLM Abyei representative Edward Lino, SAF forces tried to drive the SPLM JIU contingent away from the Kiir river bridge and the SPLA "defended itself". Deng Alor stated that the SAF attempted to cross the river an advance toward the area where tens of thousands of IDPs have gathered, following their flight from Abyei town. Both agreed that after having driven off the SAF attack, the SPLA mortared the town itself, targeting the SAF cantonment in a former secondary school (the base for SAF 31st Brigade).

15. (SBU) SPLA Chief of Staff told Conoffs a somewhat different and more nuanced version, but agreed that the SAF initially attacked the SPLA JIU unit. According to Oyei, the CJMC agreed May 20 that the SPLA JIU unit should return to its cantonment in Abyei town and the UN agreed to provide transportation. They coordinated with the SAF in Abyei, who were open to the SPLA's return. Shortly before the SPLA was to move back into the town, the SAF called and said that they had received orders from higher headquarters not to allow the SPLA back into Abyei and to resist them if they tried to enter. At this point the UN backed-out of transporting the SPLA, but the SPLA commander decided to proceed anyway. Oyei suggested that the local commander was authorized by SPLA headquarters in Juba to do so and did not just do this on his own authority. The SPLA returned to their cantonment in the town and began to entrench when they were attacked by the SAF. At some point, they withdrew back to the River Kiir, where they remain, according to Oyei. He suggested that this happened after the arrival of four SAF aircraft, two Antonov bombers and two helicopter gunships. "This was simply our attempt to redeploy the JIU - we will not be trying it again. We have dug in outside the town, but this is strictly a defensive posture," he said.

16. (SBU) Contrary to Muttriff's account, Oyei said that the SPLA in Juba has been talking to the SAF in Khartoum, as the SPLA JIU in Abyei had been communicating earlier with the SAF there. The SAF in Abyei said they were following orders from above. Khartoum claimed that local SPLA commanders had gotten out of hand, were acting on their own authority, and that Khartoum would straighten them out. Oyei doubted SAF headquarters' sincerity.

SPLM Frustration Growing

17. (SBU) FM Deng Alor admitted that President Kiir's decision to restrain the SPLA has divided the party, and delegates at SPLM National Convention complained that while the convention was delayed for events in Omdurman, Kiir has not taken similar steps in Abyei's wake. The Foreign Minister was nonetheless grateful for the American audience, noting he had just complained to the UK Ambassador that "only America was active on Abyei through sanctions, statements and like."

18. (SBU) In all three meetings with SPLM/SPLA officials, ConGen Staff underscored USG calls for restraint, reviewed the Special Envoy's plan to reach out to Kiir and NCP officials, and urged the SPLA to abide by President Kiir's order so that the U.S. could assist the parties in implementing a lasting, just solution to the Abyei impasse.

International Community Must Take a Stand

19. (SBU) In a May 19 conversation with foreign diplomats, including Congen Juba staff, UNDP Peace and Development Advisor Ferdinand von Hapsburg, a long-time incisive observer of the South, said that he is extremely concerned about Abyei and argued that the international community needs to weigh in with a strong joint statement expressing their concern and including calls for: 1.) lowering the rhetoric on both sides, 2.) a mutual withdrawal by the SPLA and the SAF, 3.) disbanding of militias, and 4.) prompt establishment of an Abyei administration.

110. (SBU) Hapsburg said that he is very worried that the situation is getting totally out of control; that as Abyei remains unresolved, the hardliners, in the NCP, the SPLM, the Dinka Ngoc and the Misseriya communities are gaining the upper hand and that the moderate leaders who have cooled things down so far are losing their credibility and will be drowned out. Each flare up makes an eventual compromise harder to achieve.

111. (SBU) Hapsburg argued that the international community needs to lay down a strong marker on Abyei immediately, first because if it does not, it will send a message to the NCP that it can continue to let the problem fester and that the outside world does not care. Second, it will send a message to the SPLM likewise that the outside world does not care and that it will have to act unilaterally (and militarily) to resolve the issue. In a separate conversation, an AMCIT advisor to the SPLM told Conoffs that he believes that the SPLM does not want to do the "wrong" thing in Abyei, but following what happened last week it is under tremendous pressure to do

something, right or wrong, if no one else does.

Comment

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¶12. (SBU) Although the precise details of the fighting May 20 remain murky, it is clear that both sides played a role in the escalation of violence. The situation in Abyei the morning of May 21 is relatively calm, however tensions could flare at any moment. Calls made by Special Envoy Williamson to both parties late on May 20 should help calm the situation. Continued engagement on Abyei will be necessary to avoid further conflict.